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Secret UK base spies on telephone calls

by Linda Melvern

A SECRET base in Cornwall with technology capable of eavesdropping on all communications beamed between satellite links—including international telephone and telex traffic—is revealed in a book to be published in America.

The US justice department is now threatening legal action to prevent publication in the book of a top secret document, said to have been released "in error." This document proves that between 1967 and 1973 the British government took part with the United States in monitoring international telex traffic to gather information against American anti-Vietnam war protestors, including actress Jane Fonda, civil rights leader Martin Luther King, singer Joan Baez and child expert Benjamin Spock.

The scale of the Cornwall monitoring operation, described in the book, conflicts with public assurances by the British government on the topic of eavesdropping.

The book, *The Puzzle Palace, A Report on America's Most Secret Agency*, by James Bamford, a 35-year-old author who trained as a lawyer is to be published later this year by the Boston company, Houghton Mifflin. It is a highly detailed and meticulously documented investigation about the American National Security Agency, (NSA) which is responsible for breaking codes and monitoring international communications.

The book includes information about the British Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), the Cheltenham-based equivalent of the NSA, and details the close relationship between the two intelligence gathering agencies.

When the Cornwall base—near Morwenstow, six miles from Bude—was announced in 1969 it was described as a "radio research station," funded jointly with America and using American equipment. Bamford describes in his book how enormous amounts of intercepted traffic are monitored, comparing the site at Bude with a secret base in America conducting the same type of operation.

The Morwenstow base, officially called the "Composite Signals Organisation Station," is a remote cliff-top installation surrounded by farmland and dominated by two 570-foot towers

receiving dishes. It is 60 miles north of the Coonhilly Downs satellite station run by British Telecom, which is a key link in the International Telecommunications Organisation (Intelsat), providing transatlantic communications.

The proof of British co-operation in monitoring American radicals is contained in a top-secret document released to the author under the Freedom of Information Act. The Sunday Times has a copy of this document. During this secret operation, code-named Minaret and never officially authorised by an American president or attorney-general, the National Security Agency, at the request of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Central Intelligence Agency, monitored the international telephone and cable communications of almost 6,000 Americans between 1967 and 1973.

Among those watch-listed under the programme, the book reveals, were Jane Fonda, Dr Martin Luther King and his successor, the Rev Ralph Abernathy, Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver, Joan Baez, Dr Benjamin Spock, and Abbie Hoffman and other members of the Chicago Seven, charged with conspiring to riot during the 1968 Democratic presidential convention.

The top-secret document is the 300-page report of the 1975 justice department investigation into illegal eavesdropping by the NSA and CIA at a time when US spy agency transgressions at home and abroad were being revealed by Congress. Twenty-three examples of illegality were found, the document reveals, but it was decided no action be taken.

The significant paragraph which reveals the close links between the British and American agencies and the co-operation in Minaret states: "Minaret intelligence... was obtained... in the course of NSA's interception of aural and non-aural (eg telex) international communications, and the receipt of GCHQ-acquired telex and ILC (International Licensed Carrier) Cable traffic."

In March, 1981, Bamford wrote to GCHQ's senior liaison officer at NSA headquarters, William Gapp, pointing out the significance of the paragraph.

was told by the justice department that the report had been released "in error," contained still-classified information, and should be returned. Subsequently, at a meeting in the conference room of Houghton Mifflin, senior justice department and NSA officials mentioned the United States Espionage Act—and now the justice department is threatening "post-publication judicial remedy."

There was no reaction from Gapp. Shortly after the letter was sent to GCHQ's representative, Bamford received a hand-delivered letter from an official at the British embassy in Washington stating: "It is not the policy of Her Majesty's Government to answer queries of this nature." Bamford believes much of the pressure to stop the document's publication has come from the British. He says: "The relationship between the NSA and GCHQ is stronger than any between the NSA and other American intelligence agencies."

The foundation of that co-operation is enshrined in a top-secret British-American pact, signed in 1947, the existence of which has never been officially confirmed by either side. "Both have the capacity of by-passing each other's laws on interception and under the pact both sides agree to share the wealth of each other's cable intercept programmes," Bamford says.

He quotes examples of this co-operation in a series of personal letters between the directors of each agency in the Sixties, one of which mentions the secret base at Bude.

Bamford says there had been considerable resistance to the building of the station by the British government. The then GCHQ director, Sir Leonard Hooper, who had joined the government code and cypher school in 1942 and took over as head of GCHQ in 1965, had resorted to a favourite and effective lobbying tactic. He had argued how important the project was to the Anglo-American pact and to the NSA.